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**Article**

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# Iraqi Kurdistan Region: from paradiplomacy to protodiplomacy

Iraqi  
Kurdistan  
Region

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to examine the secessionist orientation of Kurdistan Region's paradiplomacy in the context of two main variables: the internal structural variables in Iraq after 2003 and the nationalism variable.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study relies on the theory of neoliberalism to explain the transformation of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy to protodiplomacy. It also relies on legal approach through using the Iraqi constitution and the draft constitution for the Kurdistan Region.

**Findings** – The internal structural variables are one of the main variables to motivate the region with advanced nationalism to pursue a protodiplomacy. Secession or forming an independent state of Kurds is a historic requirement supported by the advanced nationalism of Iraqi Kurds.

**Practical implications** – This study encourages focusing on the crucial role of the internal structural variables that drive the regions, especially with the advanced nationalism to pursue a protodiplomacy. Also, this study recommends giving more focus on the external variables and Kurdistan's secession.

**Originality/value** – This paper reveals the reality of Kurdistan's protodiplomacy.

**Keywords** Nationalism, Paradiplomacy, Internal structural variables, Protodiplomacy, Referendum, Secession

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Most specialists in paradiplomacy of subnational regions agree that the dividing line between paradiplomacy and protodiplomacy lies in the region's intentional usage of the former to gain a more international recognition and to enhance the international legitimacy, identity and status of the region with the aim of ultimately gaining independence from the central state. Thus, some scholars define protodiplomacy as the region's parallel foreign activities that hold to some degree a secessionist message. Others define it as pre-independence years' diplomacy. The cases of Kosovo and the South of Sudan are prominent instances of regions that were able to develop their protodiplomacy and eventually gained independence. At present there are cases of regions where foreign diplomacy is described as a protodiplomacy more than paradiplomacy such as the Quebec region and the Kurdistan Region that are the subject of this study.



There are many explanatory variables that clarify the growing paradiplomacy of regions. Some of them in turn drive some regions, especially those of advanced nationalism, to develop their paradiplomacy in to protodiplomacy. In fact, precedents of separated regions as well as regions of advanced paradiplomacy show that the nationalism variable is almost the main factor of the growth of paradiplomacy. Nevertheless, there are other variables, such as internal structural variables and external variables, such as interdependence and the degree of complexity of the international system as well as external support. Some also focus on other variables such as globalization.

It could be said that, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has become a “semi-independent state” after 2003, in the framework of a legal federal institutional system established by the permanent Iraqi constitution in 2005. Federal states do not usually favor that regions have a wide independent foreign policy, so that the exclusive powers in developing and forming the foreign policymaking remain in the hands of the central or federal government. Meanwhile, the ambiguity of some articles of the constitution relating to region’s external powers has greatly allowed the region to develop unprecedented high paradiplomacy in which the region’s high secessionist orientation was clearly highlighted. For example, without limitation, one of the most prominent outcomes of the region’s high paradiplomacy was the increase of the region’s external representations and offices as well as the growing of the international recognition of the region and its representatives in the international community as economic partners or as partners in countering terrorism.

The secession approach of the region culminated in the secession referendum in 2017, and its results have revealed that nearly 39% of the Iraqi Kurds agree on seceding from Iraq and forming an independent state. These results reveal two facts: the first is that the nationalism variable “the high nationalism of the Iraqi Kurds” is the main variable for the development of the secessionist orientation to Iraqi Kurdistan. And the second, it clearly indicates that the internal structural variables in Iraq after 2003, which in turn contributed to the growth of diplomacy for Iraqi Kurdistan, have motivated the region’s leaders to organize that referendum, which reflects the peak of the secessionist orientation of the region.

In fact, there is no dividing line between the two realities. The dream of forming an independent Kurdish state of the Kurds is a historic dream supported by several considerations, the most important of which are the high nationalism, the high pride of the Kurdish identity and culture and its distinctiveness from others. Therefore, the national dimension was the catalyst for the growth of Kurdistan Region’s paradiplomacy after 2003, which mainly flourished by the internal structural variables in Iraq after 2003.

### *1.1 Research problem*

In recent times, sub-national governments such as regions, states and provinces have become active actors in international relations according to neoliberalism (Keohane and Nye, 1973; Thorsen and Lie, 2007; Harvey, 2005). They have engaged and formed relations with their counterparts in different parts of the world. These engagements termed paradiplomacy (Criekemans, 2006; Kuznetsov, 2015; Kooistra, 2017), cover a wide range of activities such as the promotion of trade, investments, cooperation and partnerships (Connolly, 2013; Marie, 2018; Magam, 2018; Pietrasiak, 2018). And many of regions transformed from paradiplomacy to protodiplomacy (Cornago, 1999; Lecours and Moreno, 2010). Some studies (McHugh, 2015; De Vicunõa, 2015; Najmaldin and Salih, 2016) did not distinguish between secessionism and protodiplomacy “secessionist orientation.”

Accordingly, the research problem of the study revolves around attempting to explore the features of the protodiplomacy, or the secessionist orientation of Kurdistan Region’s

paradiplomacy in the context of two main variables: the internal structural variables in Iraq after 2003 and the nationalism variable.

So, the main question of the study is:

- Q1. What is the effect of internal structural and nationalism variables on the transformation of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy to protodiplomacy?

## 1.2 Research questions

- RQ1. What is the legal framework under which Kurdistan Region engages in relations with other regions or states?
- RQ2. How does the level of actual autonomy affect the external relations of the Kurdistan Region?
- RQ3. To what extent the pattern of inter-relations between the regional and the federal government affect the Kurdistan Region's engagement in external relations with the aim of obtaining more international recognition or support for the region?
- RQ4. Is the Kurdish nationalism the main factor behind the transformation of Kurdistan Region to protodiplomacy?
- RQ5. What are the various international relations activities undertaken by the Kurdistan Region Government which constitutes its protodiplomacy?

## 2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

### 2.1 Paradiplomacy origination and definition

Paradiplomacy is not a new phenomenon. It emerged in the 19th century when the province of Quebec began to play a significant role in the international arena, for instance, the province sent a representative to France because of the growing trade relations between the province and Europe (Tavares, 2016, pp. 10–11). The regions' paradiplomacy greatly flourished in the mid-20th century. Kuznetsov (2015) attributed that growing to the radical political changes in the international system, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. The latter, in particular, laid the foundation of a new supranational policy in Europe, which in turn has allowed European regions, such as Catalonia, Flanders and Basques, to develop their own paradiplomacy (Kuznetsov, 2015, pp. 38–39). On the other hand, the growth of the region's paradiplomacy has been greatly related to other phenomena and variables in the 1990s, in particular, the globalization and the decline of the state's sovereignty (Lecours, 2002, p. 2).

The term "Paradiplomacy" as a description of the foreign activities of the regional entities was first introduced by Soldatos in 1980s. In this context, Soldatos suggested that the regions' foreign activities can only be considered a paradiplomacy when the region has sufficient autonomy to formulate a private foreign policy more independently (El-Dessouki, 2008, p. 16). Ramon (2015) defines paradiplomacy as "the international activities of the regions where regions represent the sub-national units in which located in the first level of authority after the central governments" (De Vicunõa, 2015, p. 8). Cornago (1999, p. 40) describes "paradiplomacy" as "the engagement of sub-governments regions in the international relations by establishing permanent or temporary contacts with public or private external entities, with the aim of supporting their social, economic or cultural issues,

or any other external dimension that falls within its constitutional competence.” Duchacek provided a more comprehensive definition of paradiplomacy as “the direct foreign activities of sub-national entities in which support, compliment, or identify, correct or challenge the foreign policy of the central government” (Soldatos, 1990, p. 17).

In this respect, Duchacek (1986) assigned three categories of the paradiplomacy: cross-border diplomacy; macro or supranational-diplomacy; and global partial diplomacy (micro). The first category is the most prevalent and acceptable among the scholars (Duchacek, 1986, pp. 240–241).

### *2.2 Difference between paradiplomacy and protodiplomacy*

Most of paradiplomacy experts agree that the difference between paradiplomacy and protodiplomacy lies in that the latter holds or bears a secessionist message of some degree. To be more specific, some researchers have set standards to differentiate between the two concepts. Cornago (2018), for instance, refers to protodiplomacy as the region’s diplomacy that deliberately raises tensions with the central government. In this sense, the predominant nature of the relations between regions, which have a secessionist tendency, and their central governments is dominated by a permanent conflict. This is in contrast to the predominant nature of relations in paradiplomacy, which is often dominated by a pattern of calm and cooperation. In his study, Cornago refers to cases of the secessionist conflict patterns, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (Cornago, 2018). Others define protodiplomacy as the region’s foreign policy which aims to give a more international legitimacy of the region by promoting the identity of the region and its culture. Thus, the paradiplomacy of those regions bear a clear separatist message (McHugh, 2015, pp. 244–245). In this case, regions with protodiplomacy greatly focus on forming wide foreign relations to gain the greatest amount of support with the hope of getting an official recognition following the final declaration of independence (El-Dessouki, 2008, p. 14).

In the context of the foregoing, Duchacek identified four patterns of relations between regions participating in paradiplomacy and the central governments, which by the protodiplomacy of regions can be distinguished as follows:

- *Tight centralization*: this pattern refers to the attempt of the central government to completely control the foreign affairs.
- *Combinative foreign policy*: refers to coordination between the central government and the region in the foreign policy, except in matters concerning the national security.
- *Cooperative–competitive segmentation*: this pattern more conveniently describes relations between the central government and regions with a high degree of the institutional autonomy. Therefore, relations regarding foreign policy ranges between cooperation and competition, with a relative weight gain of one of them. However, when competition outweighs cooperation, it shows the secessionist orientation of the region. This pattern has been dominating the relations between Kurdistan and Bagdad since 2003.
- *Secessionist fragmentation*: this pattern drives the regions to pursue a clear protodiplomacy. Because in this pattern, the central government has no control over the international activities of the regions. Hence, the international interactions of these regions are closer to those of the independent states. In this case, the secession could be a cause or a consequence of paradiplomacy. Accordingly, some suggest that, the Kurdistan’s independence referendum in 2017 was the result of this pattern (Duchacek, 1990, p. 29).

In addition to aforementioned, the region's desire for secession or pursuing a protodiplomacy is rooted in latent factors; particularly the region's advanced nationalism such as the Kurdistan Region. Therefore, cooperative-competitive segmentation pattern as well as secessionist fragmentation pattern between Kurdistan and Baghdad is a result of Kurdistan's desire for secession because of the factor of nationalism, in addition to, the internal structural variables in Iraq in which led to the two previous patterns.

### 2.3 Secessionism and protodiplomacy

Although the concept of secessionism is still a matter of debate among scholars, there is consensus on some definitions, most notably, the definition of Wood's (1981) that: "secessionism is a political program based on the demand for a formal withdrawal of a bounded territory from an internationally recognized state with the aim of creating a new state on that territory, which is expected to gain formal recognition by other states and the UN" (Pavkovic, 2015, p. 2). This definition illustrates that there are three stages of secessionism, the first stage is embodied in the pursuit of the region or the province to secede using all tools to achieve this, then after the secessionism it seeks in the second stage to form a state independent of the parent state, and in the third stage it struggles to obtain international recognition either from other states or from the United Nations.

This is consistent with what Pavkovic (2015) has indicated that there are three main elements of secessionism: mobilization of a population in support for a new state; the formal withdrawal of a region; and the creation of a new state on it. The secession has been attempted when all three elements are present. It is fully successful if the new state is admitted to the UN; it may be successful enough, at least for its leaders, if a few important states formally recognize it. And even if not formally recognized at all (as Somaliland is not), its citizens may still consider their *de facto* (and thus fragile) state a better outcome than being a part of their former host state (e.g. Somalia) (Pavkovic, 2015, p. 3).

It should be noted that secessionism differs from separatism which aims only at a reduction of the central authority's control over the targeted region and its population, as Wood (1981) pointed out, political movements can and often do "oscillate" between separatist and secessionist programs, initially starting with the former and ending up with the latter and vice versa.

In the absence of clear rules, secessionist movements put together, according to Muro and Woertz, the best story possible to mobilize their supporters, convince the host state and persuade the international community of the validity of their goals. Besides having compelling arguments about norms, instruments and principles, secessionists ultimately desire external legitimacy in the form of international recognition (Muro and Woertz, 2018, p. 20).

Consequently, the secessionism that achieves the region's separation, state formation and recognition of it, differs from the protodiplomacy that embodies the secessionist orientation of the region through activities at the international level. An effort to promote claims of political independence or autonomy by people or a political subunit has been characterized as protodiplomacy. This activity seeks to emulate diplomatic behavior to advance the legitimacy of the represented body. This activity is also used to publicize the identity and interests of these people or subunits for the purpose of gaining international sympathy and support (McHugh, 2015, p. 7).

### 2.4 Neoliberalism theory and paradiplomacy

Neoliberalism refers to a particular account of the development of liberal thought. It is a political ideology which resulted from a few efforts at reinvigorating classical liberalism in



the period immediately before and during Second World War by political theorists such as von Hayek (1944) and Ropke (1945). Neoliberals have sought to redefine liberalism by reverting to *laissez-faire* stance on economic policy issues, compared to the modern, egalitarian liberalism of Beveridge and Keynes (Thorsen and Lie, 2007, pp. 8–9).

According to Harvey (2005), the neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices rather than a complete political ideology, whereas he defined neoliberalism as:

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to guarantee, for example, the quality and integrity of money. It must also set up those military, defense, police and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets (Harvey, 2005, p. 2).

With regard to the ideas of neoliberalism in international relations and non-state actors and their practice of paradiplomacy, it appears that Keohane and Nye (1973) were among the first few Neoliberal theorists that stated the traditional paradigm of international relations, in which state and interstate relations are the only components in world politics that cannot explain the reality of the current situation in global affairs (Keohane and Nye, 1973, p. 880). They believe that although transnational relations have always existed in various forms and degrees in international politics, it was only after the Second World War that transnational relations have begun to take forms that really shaped world affairs (Kuznetsov, 2015, p. 70).

Consequently, Keohane and Nye sought for the value of non-state actors and transnational relations as well as the interdependence between states (Magam, 2018, p. 44). Despite the criticism of the state-centered viewpoint on world politics, representatives of the liberal school of IR do not prove that states are obsolete in contemporary international realities. Moreover, they do not disclaim that the national governments are the prevailing force in world politics, and generally states, as a rule, possess more material and symbolic power resources than transnational actors (Kuznetsov, 2015, p. 71).

From the standpoint of neoliberals, the rise of regions as transnational actors in international affairs can be partly explained as the outcome of the strengthening of subnational identities on the one hand (Kuznetsov, 2015, p. 72). On the other hand, paradiplomacy seen through neoliberal lenses is a logical consequence of the major changes in the international system: the diminishing role of interstate relations, evanescent difference between “high” and “low” politics, as well as democratization and modernization that allow linking state loyalty with local or regional (Pietrasiak, 2018, p. 19).

Keohane and Nye’s ideas are further strengthened by the fact that the once very important division between “high” and “low” politics has faded away. The assumption that “high politics,” a state’s security relationship with other states in the international system, is autonomous and therefore distinct from “low politics,” meaning societal pressures and the domestic political economy is questioned by liberal thinker. A number of “low” policy issues, such as climate change, sustainable development or education, became an important part of foreign relations. In consequence, regions and cities, as entities dealing with those problems on a daily basis, have naturally tended to develop various international links (Pietrasiak, 2018, p. 18).

Paradiplomacy and protodiplomacy can be conceived as being consistent with neoliberal conceptions of international relations. The emphasis upon a microeconomic model, derived from the marketplace, also is a prominent feature of neoliberal thought and, likewise, it fits well into the underlying understanding of the motives and purposes of both paradiplomatic activity that seeks to advance internal political and economic advantages and

protodiplomatic activity that seeks recognition of the political and economic viability of a claim to sovereign status. This approach presupposes cooperation among international actors, especially, but not exclusively, in the economic sphere (McHugh, 2015, p. 9).

### 3. Internal structural variables explaining the secessionist orientation development of Iraqi Kurdistan's paradiplomacy

#### 3.1 *Constitutional and legal framework*

It is obvious that the constitutional and legal framework governing the scale and competencies of the external activity of the regions within the framework of a federal system represents one of the main factors, or perhaps the most important of them, for the growth of regions' paradiplomacy, which regions exploit to pursue protodiplomacy, especially if the region has a real desire for independence. However, the issue is relative and depends on other determinants and variables, including the nature of the relationship between the central government and the region, and the development of nationalism in the regions. Hence, as a general rule, federal constitutions do not encourage the expansion of the external activity of the regions, so that the affairs of foreign relations are limited to the federal government, and some exceptions are given to that external activity, especially in "Low Cases." The matter in this regard is also relative. There are constitutions that allow regions to conduct a foreign paradiplomacy wider than others (Wright, 2005, p. 9). In other cases, such as the Canadian case, the constitutional and legal framework is ambiguous or indeterminate regarding the international roles of subnational units. The Canadian constitution does not include anything about the common competencies between the federal government and the provinces in the field of foreign policy, and at the same time, it does not limit foreign affairs to the government only. This matter is one of the most important reasons of the development of Quebec's paradiplomacy to a clear protodiplomacy, in addition to the developed nationalism of the region (Lecours, 2002, pp. 105–106).

*3.1.1 Legal approach.* The legal approach is an important approach when studying paradiplomacy by examining the national constitutions, provincial and regional codes, intergovernmental treaties, court decisions and other statutes. The scholars study national constitutions and legal systems to identify competences that belong to regional authorities as well as the mechanisms of intergovernmental interactions between central and subnational governments (Kuznetsov, 2015, p. 52). Trone (2001) studied the interaction between the national constitutions and the international affairs of Australia, Germany, Canada and USA, by focusing on the participation of subnational governments in external relations in two aspects: first, level of legal permission of treaty-making with foreign actors. Second, he investigates the constitutional requirements for consultations with subnational governments on foreign affairs issues.

*3.1.2 Iraqi constitution and the constitution draft of the Kurdistan Region.* Although the external activity of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy, especially the presence of representations of the region abroad prior to 2003. The main starting point for the development of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy lies precisely in the federal system that is explicitly stipulated in the [Iraq's Constitution \(2005\)](#). This guarantees a firm and legal existence of the region within the Iraqi federation, and also grants great legitimacy and powers for the development of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy. In this regard, we find that the case of the Kurdistan Region after 2003 is a mixture between the flexible federal cases and the case of the aforementioned Quebec region, especially with regard to ambiguity and the lack of a precise definition of the external powers of the region. Although, the Iraqi constitution draws up the formulation of the foreign policy and diplomatic representation of Iraq from the exclusive powers of the federal authorities as stipulated in Article 110 of the permanent Iraqi constitution; however,



paragraph 4 of Article 121 in the same constitution grants the region the right to establish offices in the Iraqi embassies and diplomatic missions abroad “to follow up the cultural, social and development affairs” (Mohammed and Owtram, 2014, p. 69). Therefore, we deduce that Article 121 grants the region great competencies in the foreign diplomatic work as an explicit constitutional right, albeit in the low politics issues. However, the provision of the constitution itself has been largely ambiguous in terms of defining the external competencies of the region. Not to mention that limiting foreign affairs to the central government shows contradiction and a paradox of the facts of reality, especially in the context of the great autonomy of the region in accordance with the constitution. Moreover, the violations of Baghdad to the constitution for instance, in the non-implementation of Article 121. However, Article 121 gives a large constitutional and legal impetus to the development of Kurdistan’s paradiplomacy, which in turn has greatly contributed to the regions pursuant to a clear protodiplomacy. Furthermore, some of the regions’ exclusive powers of the constitution include clear external dimensions, such as those related to the exercise of legislative, executive and judicial powers.

However, offices of the Kurdistan Region’s Government has not been established in Iraqi federal embassies, though the Kurdistan Region, under this paragraph, has the right to establish diplomatic offices and representations within these embassies, in other words, this paragraph of the constitutional Article 121/4 has not been implemented.

Some of the exclusive competences that the constitution devotes to the regions, which relate to the exercise of legislative, executive and judicial powers and the establishment and organization of the region’s internal security forces (Article 121 of the Constitution), include clear external dimensions. Moreover, the common competencies between the federal government and the regions, such as customs administration, electric power and the formulation of environmental, developmental, health, educational and internal water policies (Article 114 of the Constitution), have also clear international dimensions.

It is remarkable that the constitution regarding the joint powers between the federal government and the regions (and governorates not organized in the region) give the priority to the latter, in the event of a dispute between them (Article 115 of the Constitution).

It is worth noting that, according to the constitution draft of the Kurdistan Region, the president of the region issues decrees to establish the region’s representatives in foreign countries based on a proposal submitted by the prime minister in coordination with the competent authority in the federal government (Article 65/21). There are also external competencies assigned by the constitution draft to the prime minister, who represents the region’s government abroad, to receive foreign delegations, and coordinates the work of the Foreign Relations Department and other ministries and bodies related to foreign affairs (Article 74/14 and Article 65/21). The proposal of establishing offices for the region in embassies and diplomatic missions, and the nomination of directors of the aforementioned offices, shall be with the approval of Parliament (Article 74/14).

The constitution draft also allows the region to engage in foreign affairs and conclude agreements with foreign countries or regions within these countries on matters that do not fall within the exclusive competence of the federal authorities. Meanwhile, it obligates the federal government to obtain the approval of the region’s government before concluding any international treaties relating to the Kurdish governorates (Article 8).

*3.1.3 Constitutional and legal framework and institutionalization of Kurdistan’s paradiplomacy.* The high degree of institutionalization of region’s paradiplomacy is one of the main variables of the secessionist orientation of the regions. The idea here is that the greater scale and complexity of the organizational structure of paradiplomacy indicate that the region is preparing the external institutions for an independent state that is, adopting

protodiplomacy. For example, the region may design the agency or department responsible for administrating the foreign affairs in line with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the central government (Keating, 1999, p. 1).

The talk about the relationship between the constitutional and legal framework, and the high degree of institutionalization of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy is closely related. Although some attribute it to several other variables: such as the high regional autonomy of Kurdistan. It was also pointed out that Article 121 has established a strong constitutional and legal structure for the development of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy.

According to the Article 121, and the legal system of the Cabinet of Kurdistan's Region No (1/2006), the region established a Department of Foreign Relations in the same year, as a Ministry of Foreign Affairs to be headed by officer at the level of minister. On December 24, 2008, the Region Prime Minister issued decision No. (143) organizing the affairs of the department. The newly established department consists of seven directorates for organizing the work of the region's representations abroad, organizing protocols, receiving delegations, coordinating relations with international organizations and establishing international relations, in addition to the legal, financial and administrative affairs. The head of the department is considered the foreign minister of the region, and heads of directorates have ministerial ranks. Since its establishment, the department has been holding monthly meetings with foreign ambassadors and representatives of international organizations in the region to enhance the region's international relations and status. The department, with its strong activity, plus, political and technical expertise and cadres, has raised the region's external position at a high degree (Najmaldin and Salih, 2016, pp. 500–501).

Based on the foregoing, the impact of the legal and constitutional framework after 2003 is clearly manifested on the development of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy that the region has translated it into a clear protodiplomacy. The accurate empirical measurement especially in the behavioral dimension includes the official foreign visits or missions, including negotiation with other international actors, granting or receiving foreign aid and the participation in the activities of international organizations, forums and conferences. This enables us to explore the separatist features of the region. The more of these interactions, especially the negative side of them, which are represented in the number or size of official foreign visits to the region, and foreign missions in the form of trade or human rights missions or others, the greater the status and international recognition of the region. This in itself may encourage the secessionist tendency of the region, because of the increased international interest and the increase of the number of the region's foreign allies (Nasyrov, 2003).

External visits and missions are seen as an indication of the secessionist orientation of paradiplomacy, especially in terms of their frequency and intensification; plus they target the major countries and regional states that influence the secessionist program. Therefore, the President of the region, "Masoud Barzani," during the period from 2005 to 2017, made almost about 85 foreign visits, which included more than 25 countries, where he was officially received as if a representative of a country, not a region. Also, during the same period, Barzani also received approximately (566) high-level foreign delegations, including heads of states, such as the President of France, the American Vice President and the Prime Minister of Turkey, as well as the Secretary General of the United Nations. The Head of the Department of Foreign Relations made nearly 75 foreign visits during the period from 2012 to 2018 (President of the Kurdistan Region; The KRG Department of Foreign Relations).

What is certain is that the region through this huge amount of behavioral dimension of paradiplomacy shows the desire to act as an independent country, and to obtain more recognition and international legitimacy. The strong presence of the leaders of the region in

international events and conferences has become commonplace. Rather, the attendance or invitation of the regional leaders to these conferences has become highly appreciated and a priority in comparison to the representatives of Iraq. For instance, during the “Munich security” conferences in its 2015–2020 sessions, regional leaders were invited independently from the delegation of the Government of Iraq, and meetings were held with them more than the latter because of the large role of the region in fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Palani *et al.*, 2019, p. 2275).

The region’s high paradiplomacy has also resulted in more of the international attention and recognition, especially at the economic level. In 2014, Masoud Barzani was invited to participate in the World Economic Forum “Davos.” This considered the first global participation of the region at the level of economic forums. In light of globalization and the economic interdependence, the participation of the region in this forum is a great opportunity to strengthen the secessionist orientation and to increase its recognition and significance in the international community as a global economic partner, and this has been translated in the volume of investments received by the region after the participation (Mohammed, 2013, pp. 39–40).

As for international treaties and agreements, this dimension is one of the most important dimensions of paradiplomacy, because it helps regions to obtain international recognition as international actors in addition to some of the external legitimacy. The more the number of international agreements signed by the region, the more it is a clear indication of the increased international position toward the region. In fact, the increase of the region’s foreign allies gives it a strong impetus for a more secessionist orientation, or the demand of the actual independence against the central governments (Crikemans, 2006, p. 12). This is exactly the reality of the Kurdistan Region. It is fully aware that international agreements will allow the region to assert its international personality, and its ability to start formal relations with other international actors, including nation-states. Moreover, concluding of international agreements indicates the ability of Kurdistan to operate independently away from Baghdad. Since 2006, the Kurdistan concluded agreements with many countries (such as France, Germany, South Korea, Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan), in addition to the international organizations (such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) as well as multinational corporations in fields related to oil and gas, trade, agriculture, tourism, education, transportation, infrastructure, etc. In addition, the Kurdish administration insists on playing its role in the negotiations of international agreements signed by the federal government (El-Dessouki, 2012, p. 13).

At the dimension of representations, whether in countries and international organizations within the regions, or the representations of the region abroad, this is also one of the most important indicators of the secessionist orientation of the regions. The more the number of the region’s representations abroad and the number of the foreign representations and consulates operates in the region increases, the more paradiplomacy moves to protodiplomacy. The region uses its foreign representations as an embassy project for a sovereign state so as to obtain the international recognition to pave the way for the secession. It is worth mentioning that the external representations of regions that adopt a secessionist orientation rarely coordinate their work with the embassies and consulates of the parent country (Duchacek, 1990, p. 27). On the other hand, the more the foreign diplomatic representations in the region, the greater the degree of the international recognition and interest in the region, because the increasing number of foreign consulates and representations in the region is clear evidence of the strategic importance of the region to the outside world. This provides the region with the rich soil to exploit the paradiplomacy

to support its secessionist program as well as to obtain external support for this program. In this context, the region was able to establish 14 permanent offices that served as embassy of the region abroad, some of them were in major capitals. On the other hand, there are approximately 35 representations in Erbil for many countries, including Veto members of the Security Council, in addition to a representative office of the European Union, and a number of other international organizations. The increasing number of countries represented in the region suggests several indications; among them is the great success of the region's paradiplomacy, which has been able to elevate its international status and significance. Most importantly, the region's aggravated status has inspired the Kurdistan's leaders that gaining international recognition in case of the secession would be very easy. That was highlighted in the region's secession referendum in 2017 (Palani *et al.*, 2019, p. 2275).

### *3.2 Level of Kurdistan's regional autonomy*

The theory of paradiplomacy hypothesizes that the higher the degree or level of regional autonomy, the greater the possibility of a secessionist orientation of the regions' paradiplomacy. The high level of political development of the region makes its leaders more confident and able to engage in foreign affairs. On the other hand, engaging in foreign affairs would contribute in increasing this degree of autonomy.

As for Kurdistan's Regional Autonomy, besides the demographic unity of the region and the development of its internal political system since 1991, it can be said that the great development of the Kurdistan's Regional Autonomy had come from the womb of the institutional and legal framework of Iraq after 2003. This reaffirms that the institutional and legal framework is the most important variable of the internal structural variables contributing to Kurdistan's protodiplomacy, which granted the region a very large degree of political autonomy within the Iraqi federal constitutional system. On the other hand, this framework preserved the cultural distinctiveness of Kurds to the extent that some have asserted that the post-2003 federal system of Iraq was one of the reasons of the assuaging the secessionist tendency of Iraqi Kurds because it has been able to assimilate the Kurdish nationalism, through political and cultural autonomy, distinct from other nationalities in Iraq. Furthermore, the strong participation of the Kurds in the entire Iraqi political process after 2003 made them obtain the portfolio of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the first time, and also the presidency of the Republic of Iraq from 2005 until now, in addition to a number of other significant positions. This is, of course, what the researcher opposes because the high level of region's autonomy is one of the most important reasons that motivated the Kurds leaders' secessionist orientation, which marked the 2017 referendum (Danilovich, 2014, p. 104).

As far as the indicators of the increasing regional autonomy of Kurdistan are concerned, we find that although the Iraqi constitution stipulates the establishment of federal units, however, the Kurdistan Region is the only region formed in Iraq so far. Moreover, the constitution gives a constitutional legitimacy to the region retroactively since the establishment of the region's institutions in 1991, with regards (legislative, executive and judicial) authorities, including the decisions and laws issued by them, except for what is inconsistent with the exclusive powers of the federal government (Hassan, 2007, p. 49; Iraq's Constitution, 2005).

Based on the foregoing, the region has enjoyed a high level of regional autonomy, rarely obtained by the region before, which qualified it to secure a high level of paradiplomacy, and to include in its external program independent goals, which culminated in the decision to hold the independence referendum. The Kurdistan Regional Parliament approved the draft

constitution on June 24, 2009. Additionally, the appointments in the executive positions at the regional level have no connection with the central government. In addition to the existence of an independent judiciary, security and military forces (Peshmerga) are special for the region (El-Dessouki and Ababakr, 2019, p. 9).

### *3.3 Inter-governmental relations*

Paradiplomacy posits that the region's protodiplomacy is a reflection of the conflict between the government and the region. However, the intensity of this conflict would lead the region to pursue a protodiplomacy. Some regions seek to exploit this conflict to be internationalized. In fact, the pattern of the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad since 2003 is dominated by what Duchacek described as "cooperative/competitive" with the increase of the relative weight of the elements of competition and conflict, i.e. the pattern of relations as an overall struggle. The pattern of inter-governmental relations has reached the extent of fragmentation, at the time of conducting the independence referendum in Kurdistan on September 25, 2017. According to previous cases, as in Scotland and Catalonia, conducting independence referendums reflect the peak of the internal conflict between the region and the central government, and the region's pursuit to internationalize this conflict in the context of its protodiplomacy, for eventually gaining independence. This applied to the Kurdistan Region too.

Four major issues dominated the relations between Erbil and Baghdad since 2003: the shape of the Iraqi state, the loyalty of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces, the Kurdish oil industry and the fate of the Kirkuk governorate. The latter is the most complex and includes many considerations, including the Turkish position toward it. Some describe those four issues as a reflection of the inherent conflict between the Kurds' aspiration for independence, or the achievement of high autonomy for the Kurds, and Baghdad's desire to assert its influence over the region or what Duchacek describes as the "rigid central pattern" that Baghdad seeks to achieve. As for the issue of the shape of the Iraqi state, which is the least complicated issue, it reveals the inherent conflict between Erbil and Baghdad over the degree of autonomy of the region. Kurds since 2003 have defended on the flexible pattern of federalism, which gave them a very high degree of the regional autonomy, so that the region has become a semi-independent state. While the course of events since 2003 revealed that Baghdad seeks in various ways to undermine this flexible federalism and impose more hegemony on the region to weaken it by withdrawing some constitutional competencies and powers from it.

The Iraqi constitution stipulates that the federal government formulates and executes the national security policy, including establishing and managing the armed forces to secure the protection and guarantee the security of Iraq's borders and to defend Iraq (Article 110 of the Constitution), but the constitution itself has given the regions the right to own its armed forces and internal security forces. The constitution stipulates: "The regional government shall be responsible for all the administrative requirements of the region, particularly the establishment and organization of the internal security forces for the region such as police, security forces, and guards of the region" (Article 121/5 of the Constitution), where it is noted that the constitution gives the government of the region the exclusive right to establish and form a special army or its own force, as its name was mentioned with guards of the region, which is the Peshmerga forces, to defend the region, maintain security and peace in it and protect its borders. The constitution does not refer to details of the size of these military forces for the region, and the body that finances and arms them, nor does it authorize the legislature to legislate a law regulating this issue, and it leaves the door open for

interpretations about this article, this also led to the emergence of disputes between the Federal Government and the Kurdistan Region's Government.

The conflict between Baghdad and Erbil over the Kurdish industry and management of oil also reveals the reality of an inherent conflict over the Kurds' ambitions for independence. It is not an exaggeration to say that oil is one of the most important factors contributing to increasing the regional autonomy of Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as increasing the prosperity and stability of the region, and consequently it has given a very strong impetus to the development of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy. It is sufficient to say that the huge interest of major international oil companies in the region increases, after the announcement of the Government of Kurdistan and the issuance of the Kurdistan Oil and Gas Law in 2007 that grants high participation privileges to international oil companies to work in the region in the oil field. In 2012, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq had signed contracts to explore for oil with major companies such as ExxonMobil, Gazprom, Total and Chevron. Definitely, these contracts are evidence of the success of the region's paradiplomacy and the investment of these contracts in developing the paradiplomacy. On the other hand, the Government of Baghdad believes that the Kurd's privilege in the manufacture and management of oil in the region forms the most threatening factors to the authority of Baghdad, and perhaps the unity of Iraq itself, as the increase of oil revenues in the hands of Erbil shall make the region financially sufficient, and thus drives the region to more independence. Similarly, the issue of the Peshmerga exploded from the ambiguity of the constitution about the role of regional governments in developing oil and gas. According to Article 112 of the constitution, "the federal government, with the provinces and regions producing oil and gas, shall assume the management of oil and gas extracted from the existing fields." Consequently, the Kurds have built their independent position from Baghdad on the Kurdish oil management and industry on the basis that the article refers to "current fields," and not the fields that have been recently discovered. This, of course, was opposed by Baghdad, which considers that the article has given it the right to supervise all oil production fields whether in the past or in the future. In light of this ambiguity, the region issued the Oil and Gas Law of 2007, which stipulates that "the region has the right to independently exploit the newly discovered natural resources on the territory of the region." Conversely, the Government of Baghdad has taken many steps to block Erbil's efforts to gain independence in the oil industry, which includes imposing sanctions on foreign companies operating in the Kurdish oil industry. This is definitely a very complicated issue to be resolved, for its strong link with the development of Kurdistan's regional autonomy as well as the development of its paradiplomacy (Nader *et al.*, 2016, pp. 37–38; O'Driscoll and Baser, 2019).

The fate of Kirkuk governorate is the most serious and complicated issue. The governments of Baghdad and Erbil have been struggling over the eligibility of the province since 2003. Moreover, Turkey considers Kirkuk and Mosul Turkish provinces that were taken away in favor of Iraq. The Iraqi constitution sought to resolve the issue of Kirkuk through Article 140 of the constitution, which stipulated holding a referendum on the province's fate by the end of December 2007 that was postponed to the summer of 2008, in agreement with the government of Erbil. Up to the time of preparing this thesis, this referendum has not been implemented. This, indeed, strengthens the constitutional position of Kurdistan in the face of Baghdad. The researcher also believes that the Kirkuk issue will remain a pending issue without an appropriate solution between Erbil and Baghdad. The essence of this matter is because of two facts. First, Baghdad is certain that the result of the referendum will be in favor of Kurdish majority, hence its accession to the region. The second fact is the oil importance of Kirkuk, which will support the secessionist orientation of the



region. On the other hand, Kirkuk is one of the Kurds' issues that cannot be compromised with Baghdad, because of its symbolic, historical and economic status for Kurds. Accordingly, the researcher argues that the Kirkuk issue, especially in light of the lack of constitutional commitment to fulfill the Article 140, will be the most important tools for Erbil to internationalize its internal conflict with Baghdad in the context of its protodiplomacy, or its bet for independence (Najmaldin and Salih, 2016, p. 513; Nader *et al.*, 2016, p. 23).

#### 4. Nationalism variable and Kurdistan's protodiplomacy

When talking about Kurdistan's protodiplomacy, nationalism emerges as one of the most powerful explanatory variables for the region's pursuit of secession. Kurdish nationalism, from the point of view of the Kurds, is the same as other nationalities that should enjoy independence within an independent political entity. Hence, even ensuring Kurdish autonomy within a federal political system, this, however, does not meet the historic aspiration of the Kurds to form an independent state on the lands of the historic Kurdistan. The question of nationalism is the basis in the conflicts or struggle between the Kurds and successive central governments since "Sykes and Picot," whether in Iraq or Turkey.

There are many different definitions and perceptions of nationalism. Some define it as the powerful sense of belonging to a specific nation and this belonging creates identities. While others define it as a tool for political mobilization as it seeks to rally peoples around a specific issue related to identity and common destiny. A prominent example is the Catalonia region, where nationalism plays a very important role in mobilizing the inhabitants of the region to demand secession or the right to self-determination (Magam, 2018, pp. 29–30).

Arguably, the most active cases of paradiplomacy, such as Quebec, Flanders, Catalonia and Basque, indicate the strong nexus of the advanced nationalism, or the presence of strong national movements. In his study, Connolly (2013) found that advanced nationalism and rise of a nationalist movement is the main driver of the growing wave of calls for secession in Europe after 2010, such as Flanders, Catalonia and Scotland. Despite the big atmosphere of democracy that these regions enjoy, this also greatly contributes to develop their paradiplomacy (Connolly, 2013, pp. 52–55). Accordingly, nationalism is one of the main explanatory variables for the transition of regions' paradiplomacy to protodiplomacy with the ultimate goal of independence. In this case, the focus of all the regions' paradiplomacy activities is to assert and promote their private identity (Kuznetsov, 2015, pp. 67–68). In this context, Davila and Silva find that identity is the main driver of the development of the paradiplomacy. The identity is the main factor for the region's leaders to justify the external decision-making of paradiplomacy as well as for *rapprochement* with other countries and regions that have common cultural ties. While Prieto argues that nationalism is the main driver of all the region's paradiplomacy activities. In other words, the main aim of the region's foreign activities even the economic, is to promote the region's culture and identity. Consequently, paradiplomacy is basically identity cultural phenomenon (Marie, 2018, p. 358). Quebec region, for instance, largely founded its paradiplomacy activity with France on the French language association. This example reveals not only the role of nationalism to galvanize paradiplomacy, but also its role to transfer it to protodiplomacy. Because Quebec's powerful relations with France motivated it to a more secessionist orientation against Canada, which ultimately led to the referendum on the region's independence in 1995 (Kooistra, 2017).

In fact, Kurdistan after 2003, presents a distinctive model of how to shape identity or national considerations in the internal and external practice of the region. Ironically, the post-2003 Iraqi federal political system, which among its goals to prevent the secession of

northern Iraq, has greatly contributed, because of the high autonomy of the region, to strengthen the national practice of the region's leaders. The action plan that was developed and directed at strengthening the national identity, including the region's foreign policy activity that exceeded the region's constitutional powers in the foreign policy, in a manner that raised doubts of the central government and neighboring countries about the region's desire to secede (Danilovich, 2014, p. 90). El-Dessouki (2010) shows that paradiplomacy has provided Kurdistan with significant opportunities to highlight the "external distinctiveness" of the main purpose of distinguishing the region with a private identity different from Iraq's identity. Since 2003, Kurdistan's leaders insist on consolidating their international interactions with the idea that Iraq is a bi-national country since its founding. Hence, nationalism has largely contributed in the development of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy, and vice versa, so that the secessionist orientation of Kurdistan's paradiplomacy cannot be understood away from the nationalism variable (El-Dessouki, 2010, p. 20). In this respect, the Kurdistan Government has used its foreign apparatus to highlight the Kurdish culture, through the work of supporting the cultural activities inside and outside the region, which aim at promoting the private symbols of the national identity of Kurdistan, often involving all members of the regional government. Among the most prominent of those activities that the Kurdistan Regional Government is keen on is Eid Nowruz (Kurdish New Year). In 2009, the former Iraqi Foreign Minister (Hoshiyar Zebari) coordinated with the region's foreign agencies to invite diplomats from 30 countries in Erbil to celebrate Nowruz. Another example of cultural activities is the sponsorship of a UK Government delegation in the UK for the London Kurdish Film Festival (Zadeh and Kirmanj, 2017, pp. 596–597). In this regard, it must be emphasized that the expansion of the region's external activity at the political and economic levels is a key part of strengthening the region's identity and international personality to gain more recognition in preparation for secession, which is similar to the case of Quebec.

## 5. Kurdistan independence referendum 2017 between nationalism and internal structural variables

On June 6, 2017, Masoud Barzani held a meeting with the leaders and representatives of the Kurdish political parties participating in the Kurdistan Parliament and Government. During this meeting, he confirmed the date of the independence referendum on September 25, 2017. Despite all internal and international endeavors to stop the implementation of the referendum, it was held as scheduled, which was voted for independence 92.73%, 72.16% participation rate.

Many have addressed several reasons and motives for the Iraqi Kurdistan Government to conduct this referendum, specifically at this time. This section attempts to provide a somewhat different view of the underlying causes of this referendum, by focusing specifically on the role of the internal structural variables in driving of this referendum.

Regarding nationalism variable, there is no slightest difference in the matter that this referendum is revealing this variable, and it is sufficient to demonstrate that the result of the referendum, which came in at 93% was in favor of independence from Baghdad. It can be said that the Kurds' aspirations for independence are the accumulation of many years of struggle against the arbitrary policies of Baghdad. Here we must remember that the issue of independence began to disseminate strongly after 2003, within the Kurdish circles inside and outside of Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2004, a petition was compiled and signed by nearly a million Kurds from inside Kurdistan and from the diaspora that demanded the Kurdistan Government to declare independence. This is in addition to organizing mass rallies inside and outside the region, which support independence. In 2005, a movement called the

“Kurdistan Referendum Movement” organized an informal referendum that was rejected by the nationalist parties in the region and the regional government, and its results showed that 98% of the Kurdish Kurds want independence. However, in addition to the great role of the nationalism variable, the 2017 referendum came as a result of the great development of Kurdistan’s paradiplomacy, especially at the level of the region’s considerable recognition and legitimacy that realized in the international arena, which in turn stimulated the Iraqi Kurds’ nationalism (O’Driscoll and Baser, 2019).

As for the internal structural variables and their effects on the referendum, we find that the region’s rush to this referendum is the result of the three internal structural variables. Palani *et al.* (2019) contends that the constitutional and legal framework that transformed the region into a semi-independent state has given the region a very strong impetus to develop its dynamics of the external interaction so as to increase the recognition. In addition to the increase of the internal autonomy *vis-à-vis* Baghdad, the result has been the growing of the region’s confidence, which drove it to the referendum, as well as evolving nationalism since 1991. In this context, the region succeeded after 2003 to maintain its special forces “Peshmerga,” in addition to increasing the institutionalization of foreign relations as well as maintaining strong economic and political stability. Indeed, this *de facto* has granted the region a more power in the face of the weak Government of Baghdad. Furthermore, there is also the issue of the gains achieved by the region during its war against the ISIS, as it was one of the most important strength that motivated the region to independence. That issue revealed the fragmentation pattern of relations between Erbil and Baghdad, where the collapse of Iraqi forces in northern Iraq has enabled the region to expand its territory and annexation of Kirkuk, which is one of the most important issues of the dispute between Baghdad and Erbil, in addition to annexing other regions such as Khormato and Mosul. After annexing Kirkuk, Barzani stated that Article 140 was settled and implemented in our favor (Palani *et al.*, 2019, pp. 2271–2273).

Arguably, the ISIS war has given a strong impetus to Kurdistan’s paradiplomacy. The region has managed, through the coordination and cooperation with the countries participating in the anti-terrorism coalition, to establish a strong external relations network as a vital partner to counter terrorism. For instance, in 2014, the European decided to provide weapons to the Kurdistan Region in light of fighting terrorism (Philips, 2016, pp. 362–363). Also, in 2016, the USA signed a military memorandum of understanding with Kurdistan on the counter of terrorism (Mohsen, 2017, p. 305).

As previously mentioned, the degree of intensification of the internal conflict between the region and the central government had led to the fragmentation pattern, which in turn stimulated the regions to pursue protodiplomacy. In fact, the researcher believes that the internal conflict between Erbil and Bagdad over some cases since 2003 have represented the greatest motivation of the independence referendum of Kurdistan. It is sufficient to refer here to a few examples of Bagdad’s violations of the constitution, such as the Article 140, which is a constitutional right and has not yet been implemented, and also Article 121 of the Constitution. Additionally, the successive Iraqi Governments since 2005 have also violated their constitutional obligations regarding the region’s financial allocations.

So we can conclude that the extent of the big role the internal structural variables have played since 2003, stimulated the region to conduct this referendum. This is in addition to the advanced nationalism variable of the Iraqi Kurds.

## 6. Conclusion

Some studies (Cornago, 2018; Kuznetsov, 2015; Kooistra, 2017; Duchacek, 1990; Keohane and Nye, 1973) – especially with the emergence of neoliberalism – focused on paradiplomacy as a

reflection of the activities of subnational units such as regions, provinces and other non-states actors, especially after a long period of reluctance on the literature of international relations to study the activities and practices of subnational entities, and the focus on states as the only actor in international relations.

Also, other studies (Kooistra, 2017; Crikemans, 2006; Lecours, 2002; Keating, 1999) that focused on the activities of non-state actors did not pay attention to how paradiplomacy is transformed to protodiplomacy, in addition to the confusion between protodiplomacy and secessionism, where protodiplomacy means “secessionist orientation” not “secessionism.” This is in addition to the scarcity of studies (Mohsen, 2017; Danilovich, 2014; Mohammed and Owtram, 2014) that examined the secessionist orientation of the Kurdistan Region, especially its practice of parallel diplomacy in terms of activities, representations, offices, etc. as well as the transformation of paradiplomacy into protodiplomacy.

This confirms the contribution of the current research in adding to the literature of international relations an attempt to bridge the gap of paradiplomacy and the extent of the link between paradiplomacy and protodiplomacy, and the theoretical framework embodied in the neoliberalism theory in which paradiplomacy has grown, by focusing attention on non-states actors in international politics.

The study also seeks to highlight the factors affecting the transformation of paradiplomacy for the Kurdistan Region to protodiplomacy, such as internal structural variables: the Iraqi constitution, the region autonomy and the region’s external activities and relations, in addition to the advanced nationalism that helped the secessionist orientation and encouraged protodiplomacy.

This study seeks to clarify the features of the secessionist orientation of Kurdistan Region’s paradiplomacy in the context of two main variables: the internal structural variables in Iraq after 2003 and the nationalism variable. In fact, Kurdistan Region is characterized as one of the regions with a very advanced nationalism, which is definitely one of the most important variables of protodiplomacy. However, nationalism is not itself sufficient to enable regions like Kurdistan to adopt a clear protodiplomacy for eventually secession. Therefore, Kurdistan Region provides one of the most prominent cases of the impact of the internal structural variables on transforming the region’s paradiplomacy into protodiplomacy.

Indeed, Kurdistan after 2003 has become a semi-independent state that enjoys a very high regional autonomy, because of the internal structural variables, particularly the constitutional and legal framework of Iraqi federalism post-2003. This situation had of course greatly contributed in evolving the Kurdistan’s paradiplomacy, which in turn has also granted the region big opportunities to promote its nationalism and private identity. On the other hand, it provided the region with the power to challenge the central government over the disputed cases.

Therefore, in light of the internal structural variables, particularly the conflict over the disputed cases and nationalism, the relation between Erbil and Bagdad since 2003, was predominated by the competitive pattern, which motivated the region to pursue a clear protodiplomacy for independence. It has been completely confirmed with the secession referendum in 2017, when the relation has completely been predominated by the fragmentation pattern.

In short, nationalism and the internal structural variables are the main cause of the transformation of Kurdistan’s paradiplomacy into protodiplomacy for eventually secession and forming an independent state for the Kurds as a historic dream.

The study concludes some recommendations as follows:

- Applying the Iraqi constitution, especially Article 121 which stipulates commitment to the constitution to settle the outstanding problems between the region and the state. With a constitutional amendment to achieve compatibility between Article 110 and Article 121 with regard to the external activities of the Iraqi regions.
- The commitment of each party to the constitution and the real participation of the powers by all parties.
- Settlement of all problems between Erbil and Baghdad, especially with regard to the oil and gas law, revenues, disputed territories and the Peshmerga issue.
- Following-up development of Kurdistan' secession and giving more focus on other influencing variables in this regard, especially the external variables, such as globalization and interdependence, which have given the region more independence and strength in their paradiplomacy *vis-à-vis* central governments.

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